

Abalone House launches 'brandy bar'

By  Eugene Yiga

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"I'm delighted to be here," said Christelle Reade-Jahn, Director of the South African Brandy Foundation. "It's such a special evening, bringing together everything that's good in South Africa: good company, excellent conversation, fantastic brandies, and one of the best chefs in the country."

Reade-Jahn was speaking at Abalone House and Spa, a boutique hotel in Paternoster. The occasion? A media launch for the country's first dedicated brandy bar and a new brandy pairing menu from celebrity chef Reuben Riffel.



"Two of the biggest challenges the [South African Brandy Foundation](#) faces are consumer ignorance and confusion," says Danie Pretorius, general manager of the South African Brandy Foundation. "There are many classes of brandy but to many people in South Africa it only means one thing, and that 'thing' unfortunately carries a very negative perception."

Pretorius explains that the Stellenbosch-based non-profit organisation, which represents more than 95% of the country's brandy producers, addresses consumer ignorance through on-going education. They target specific institutions, establishments, and venues, training service staff so that they can become knowledgeable about brandy. The return on investment for this is much higher than if they focused their efforts on prospective brandy-drinkers one by one.



"The biggest shift in perceptions happens when we have time to speak with people for two or three hours, and to taste the brandies with food," Reade-Jahn says. "So Danie came here [to Abalone House] and trained all the staff on the basics of brandy, how to serve it, and how to pair it. It's a huge plus for the venue because the staff get a Cape Wine Masters certificate and because they can sell more product. For example, maybe you as the consumer want to have a nice brandy with your dark chocolate and coffee after your meal. Now you have a knowledgeable person telling you what will work well with that."

Paddington Madimutsa, a waiter and barman at Abalone House and Spa, agrees. "The training provided me with a wider perspective of brandy, especially the differences in producing blended and pot-distilled products," he says. "This will allow me to explain to customers not only why they should be drinking brandy - especially after a meal here at Reuben's Abalone House - but also how they should be enjoying it."



The evening began with cocktails by candlelight (loadshedding!), much to the frustration of the photographer and other attendees who wanted to brag to all their followers on Instagram. But Eskom couldn't kill the spirit that night. Champion barman Kurt Schlechter, in a quirky skull-and-crossbones tie, prepared a range of new cocktails based on some of South Africa's top-ranked popular and artisanal potstill brandies. These will now form part of the Urban Brandy Cocktail Route around the country.

"The best way to make a cocktail is whichever way the customer likes it," he said before explaining some of the trends towards savoury cocktails (biltong anyone?) and 'couture ice'. "At least all those years working in dark bars are paying off!" Indeed they were, given how well the guests welcomed his creations: from the Brandle and the Bojito to the Brandy Bull and the Brandy in the Bos. "Cocktails go down too quickly," one of the journalists said. "That's the problem. Or the point!"



And then it was time for dinner at the onsite Reuben's Restaurant, opened in October 2013 and incorporating fresh local produce with a regional twist, much like his other restaurants in Franschhoek, Robertson, and at One&Only Cape Town.

"When I started in the restaurant business, cognac was the first thing that, when I tasted it, I thought 'Wow, this is different. I don't need to add anything'," Riffel said. "Spending time with Winnie Bowman [a Cape Wine Master and international wine and brandy judge], I learned so much more about the quality of South African brandies. And I thought this could be quite a cool thing to collaborate on with the South African Brandy Foundation."

As he spent more time with Bowman, Riffel learned to appreciate and drink brandy as a connoisseur. The two then began speaking about how brandy could pair well with food.

"Reuben has taken the best of South African brandies, from the biggest distillers right through to the smaller craft brandies, and he's created a menu to pair around the aromas that are prevalent in those brandies," Reade-Jahn said. "So this is a unique experience and special for us to be here at the launch of the first brandy bar."



What's for dinner? For starters: smoked hake with mussels, sweet corn crème, and bisque paired with Flight of the Fish Eagle or spiced chicken-liver parfait, toasted brioche, and apple chutney paired with Kingna 5-year-old. For mains: slow-braised oxtail, smoked bacon, black mushroom puree, butternut, and parsnips paired with Van Ryn's 12-year-old or grilled prawns, saffron risotto, sauce vierge with Joseph Barry 10-year-old. And for dessert? Poached pears and apples, medjool dates, orange sorbet, brandy anglaise accompanied by an Upland Organic or KWV 10-year-old.

Riffel explains that there are a lot of classic dishes that work with brandy and that his motivation for this menu was to get people to appreciate the quality that's out there; not just the big names but also the smaller guys who are making brandies

that rival the best in the world. He also says that the West Coast - and Abalone House and Spa in particular - is the perfect place to showcase how many of the local foods, in their own simplicity, work with brandy.

"I compiled this menu because I thought a lot of those dishes can go with a variation of brandies, not only with specific brandies," Riffel said. "It's not supposed to take over from your normal wine and food pairing. This is something interesting; it's an alternative if you sometimes want to try something different."

Eugene Yiga was a guest of Abalone House, where the five-course South African brandy menu and the boutique brandy cocktail menu will be available to the public on an on-going basis - just the ticket for a cold West Coast winter!

Boasting a fantastic [winter spa special](#) in conjunction with the Healing Earth Spa on the premises, guests are pampered from start to finish: accommodation, meals, and a two-and-a-half hour spa treatment, employing the healing properties of massage and aromatherapy.

The package includes two nights' accommodation, one spa treatment per person, breakfast on both mornings, and a two-course dinner at the highly-acclaimed Reuben's Abalone House each evening. Cost is R1945 per person sharing per night and is valid until 31 August.

So, for [intimate weddings](#) (up to 40 guests), [small conferences](#) (up to 30 delegates), or a [private getaway](#), call +27 (0)22 752 2044, email info@abalonehouse.co.za, or visit www.abalonehouse.co.za.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello.

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